

Winthrop Harbor hopes lakefront hotel will make village a tourist destination

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Would a 150-room lakefront hotel make Winthrop Harbor a tourist destination? Village officials are hoping it will, and have started the process to try to attract one.

"One step at a time," Mayor Michael Bruno said. "It's going to happen."

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The Village Board voted recently to establish an enterprise zone, an Illinois Department of Commerce incentive for new business development. The zone includes five acres of state-owned land adjacent to the North Point Marina, land that the village thinks is perfect for a resort hotel.

"Our main objective would be to see that hotel resort built," Bruno said.

Winthrop Harbor is cooperating with Zion and Beach Park to apply for the enterprise zone incentive. The zone would include contiguous land in all three communities.

According to the Department of Commerce website, companies in an enterprise zone are offered exemptions from certain state taxes in addition to local tax incentives.

Most of Winthrop Harbor's lakefront is designated as natural space, owned either by the Illinois Department of Natural Resources or the Lake County Forest Preserves, according to Pat DiPersio, community development director for the village. The IDNR also owns North Point Marina on Winthrop Harbor's lakefront.

However, as part of its master plan for area, the IDNR designated five acres just north of the marina, currently a parking lot, for commercial use, DiPersio said.

"It's always been our plan," DiPersio said of a lakefront hotel, adding that the plans have been shelved since the marina opened back in 1989.

"(We need to) take them off the shelf," DiPersio said. "We think it's an ideal time."

DiPersio said the hotel would dramatically increase tourism dollars spent in the village. He added that visitors who stay overnight in a community spend three times as much there as those who just come for a day.

According to DiPersio, having a big hotel on the lakefront is critical to Winthrop Harbor becoming a tourist destination.

"It is the cornerstone for growing a tourism industry," he said.

In the village's plan, the IDNR would still own the land, but a private company would build and run the hotel. This arrangement is like the one for the marina, DiPersio said, which is owned by the IDNR but operated by Westrec Marine.

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He also compared the arrangement to the one at Illinois Beach Resort in Zion and Starved Rock State Park in LaSalle County.

North Point Marina is the largest boating facility in the state, DiPersio said, having 1,500 slips. He added that the level of occupancy has varied from year to year.

In addition to having a large lakefront hotel, DiPersio said he hopes the village will one day be the starting point for a lakefront nature trail running through five communities. He said Winthrop Harbor, Zion, Beach Park, Waukegan and North Chicago are working together to make that trail a reality, and recently received a grant from the Chicago Metropolitan Agency for Planning to determine the trail's route.

"We're taking a regional approach," he said, adding that the trail will help Winthrop Harbor to "use all of our natural assets."

DiPersio said the grant will pay up to \$200,000 for a consulting company to determine where the trail should run and how segments will be connected through the communities.

"We've been working on that (grant) for quite some time," Bruno said. "We got it. It's phenomenal."

Bruno said the village is also planning to have a natural area within its boundaries that will be designated as an "environmental studies campus." He described this as a place where researchers could study wind, solar power, erosion and other natural phenomena.

According to Bruno, the land set aside for this would be west of the Metra tracks in Winthrop Harbor, but east of Sheridan Road.

Although the campus is still in the planning stages, Bruno said, the concept is gaining support.

"We have a lot of people giving us a thumbs up," Bruno said, adding that he believes a hotel, lakefront trail and environmental studies campus will change the village's reputation dramatically.

"We're going to definitely put Winthrop Harbor on the map," he said.

Mary McIntyre is a freelance reporter for the News-Sun.